



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
נצבים-וילך / NITZAVIM - VAYEILECH
JEW'S DANCE AT EVERY WEDDING!

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 4, 2007 / כ"א אלול תשס"ז

PARSHA:

נצבים-וילך / NITZAVIM - VAYEILECH

SERMON TITLE:

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In loving memory of
ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.



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NITZAVIM - VAYEILECH

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This week we read the very last mitzvah in the Torah: every Jew must write a Sefer Torah.

Were you ever in a Sephardic Synagogue? Have you ever seen a Sephardic Torah scroll? It looks very different from the one we have in our Shul. Our Torahs are wrapped around wooden poles and covered with a soft velvet mantle while Sephardim keep their Torahs in hard ornamented cases.

This is not the only difference in how we treat our Torahs. When we read from the Torah, during the service, we, Ashkenazim, lay the Torah down on the bimah and read from it. The Sephardim, on the other hand, read from the Torah while it is standing upright on the bimah.

The interesting thing about this difference is that the original argument was not between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi, it was between two Ashkenazim: Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam.

Why do Torah scholars argue this point, what is the difference how the Torah is positioned?

When it comes to the Torah's honor we treat the Torah like an honorable person. We dress it nicely and we place a crown on its head. We carry it on our arms and we never leave it alone. We dance with it, we kiss it and we rise to our feet when it



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enters the room. So the question is, is it more respectful for an honorable person to stand or sit?

Even in our own experience we've seen both practices in action. The President stands during an address and his audience sits. On the other hand the Rebbe would sit when he spoke to us and we would stand and listen. Both are out of respect.

Of course there are scholars upholding each side of the argument. But at their heads, Rashi was of the opinion that the Torah scroll must always be kept in an upright position, both during reading and while in the Ark, standing is more dignified. Rabeinu Tam, (Rashi's grandson and arch dissident) argued that the Torah should always be lying down, both for reading and in its place in the Ark, for to make the Torah stand is not respectful at all.

And this argument doesn't stop here. These opposing views apply to how the parchment should be positioned inside the Tefillin boxes. Rashi says that the parchment should be placed vertically in the Tefillin. Rabeinu Tam, on the other hand believed that the parchments should lay horizontally. (Today everyone follows Rashi's view regarding Tefillin- even inside the Rabeinu Tam Tefillins). However it is interesting to note that among the archeological findings in Israel they did find some Tefillin in which the parchments are set horizontally, in accordance with Rabeinu Tam's view.

The same argument is about the Mezuzah. There are differing opinions whether we should put the Mezuzah horizontally or vertically. The Sephardic custom is to



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put their mezuzahs upright. We, in this case, take the middle road and put the mezuzah on slant.

The truth is that we kind of make the same compromise for the Torah scroll. You may have noticed that the bimah isn't flat, it's on a slant. This isn't just for convenience. We actually want to follow both opinions to the best of our ability. In this way, when the Torah is on the Bima, it's not standing upright, and it's not lying flat either. The Torah is kept on a slant inside the ark as well, partly by default and partly for sake of following both opinions.

Although, as the Jewish saying goes: "*M'ken nisht tanzten oif aleh chasenes*," lit. "You can't dance at every wedding," we certainly try.

[This is not the only case where we try to follow two dissenting views.]

Before reciting the blessing over the Challah on Shabbat we make a little scratch on the loaf we're going to cut. This is because on the one hand it's best to recite the blessing over a whole loaf. On the other hand it is best not to wait at all between reciting the blessing and eating the food, which means that the bread should already be cut.

So we do both. We leave the loaf whole for the blessing but we make a little cut on the bread before the blessing to show that we have begun the process of the cutting.

What drives this Jewish tendency to follow two dissenting views?

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I would compare it to a person who is fighting an illness. He will visit many doctors to find a cure. And any doctor will agree that the more types of treatment/therapies that you try, the better are your chances of achieving a complete recovery. And since your health is very important to you of course you would try to follow as many as possible!

The same rule applies in Yiddishkeit. Since Torah is very important to us we try to follow as many (valid) opinions as possible, just to better our chances of doing each mitzvah in the best possible way.

So go ahead, dance at every wedding!